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New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez:

# Living the American Dream

BY JONELLA FRANK



History was made when Susana Martinez ('86) was sworn in January 1, 2011, as New Mexico's first female governor and the country's first Latina governor. Just weeks later, her name was being mentioned as a possible 2012 Republican vice presidential candidate. It is "humbling" to be named as a possible contender for the second-highest office in the United States, she said, but she's not interested in that job. She is too focused on serving New Mexico.

Martinez was born July 14, 1959, in El Paso, Texas, the youngest of three children of Paula and Jacobo Martinez. She grew up there, graduating in 1977 from Riverside High School, where she served as student body president. It was in high school that Martinez realized she wanted to have a career in public service. To accomplish that, she decided she needed to be a lawyer.

She attended the University of Texas at El Paso, going to classes during the day and working as a security guard for her parents' security guard business at night. Martinez graduated in 1981 with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and remained in El Paso, working in the family business for two more years.

In 1983, she came to Norman to attend the OU College of Law. After her first two semesters of law school, Martinez traveled to England to participate in the Oxford Summer Program. However, it was her experience the following summer with a judicial internship in El Paso that proved to be pivotal in the development of her legal career.



Gov. Martinez makes her way through the New Mexico State Capitol Building on the day of her first State of the State Address.

She interned with a judge whose docket included criminal cases. One case that summer had a big impact on Martinez. It was a murder case in which a man was accused of killing his eight-months-pregnant wife and throwing her body into a river with his young children watching. As a result of her involvement in that trial, Martinez decided she wanted to be a prosecutor.

Looking back on the campaign, Martinez said without hesitation, the most positive aspect was meeting the people of her state.

With that decision made, Martinez focused on honing her advocacy skills. She excelled in practice court, winning the Albert C. Hunt Award for outstanding performance. In addition, Martinez was selected, for the second time, as a member of OU Law's team for the National Trial Competition. "Only a few students, during the 26 years that I sponsored and coached the team, made the team twice,"

said Professor Emeritus Ted Roberts. "After working with her in class and on the trial teams, I had no doubt that she would be a success in the practice of law."

After graduation, Martinez moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, to work as an assistant district attorney in the Third Judicial District Attorney's Office. She worked in this job for seven years, handling numerous tough cases and earning a reputation as a hard-working, effective prosecutor.

In 1993, Martinez went to work for the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department. She represented the state in cases in which children were removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect. In March 1996, Martinez left this position to run against her former boss for district attorney.

She won the election with almost 60 percent of the vote and took over as district attorney of the second largest district attorney's office in New Mexico. Throughout the next 14 years, Martinez was re-elected to that office three times and personally tried some of the district's most difficult cases, including child abuse and child homicide.

Her most memorable case is the 2002 Baby Brianna child abuse case in which she prosecuted the mother, father and uncle of five-and-a-half-month-old Brianna Lopez, who died as a result of extensive injuries inflicted by these family members. Martinez said the investigation revealed the baby "had been abused her entire life." The case gained national attention and prompted a change in New Mexico law increasing the maximum penalty in a child abuse death case from 18 years to a life sentence. Martinez keeps a picture of Baby Brianna in her office, next to her desk.



Martinez listens to Medal of Honor recipient, Sgt. First Class Leroy Petry, at a July 2011 Welcome Home Ceremony in Santa Fe.

When asked about the emotional toll exacted by tough cases, particularly ones involving children as victims or witnesses, Martinez replied, "You just have to handle it and find a balance. You have to remain objective and can't get emotional. You don't want to become part of the damage."

Martinez readily admits she "lived her work and didn't stop until it was time to eat or sleep." For her efforts, she was honored twice as the New Mexico Prosecutor of the Year.

The desire to be a public servant that first surfaced in high school still burned strong. On July 17, 2009, she entered the race for governor of New Mexico.

Martinez emerged from the five-candidate Republican primary with 51 percent of the vote and faced Democrat Diane Denish, the state's lieutenant governor since 2003. The race captured national attention as a woman against woman gubernatorial general election contest, as did the Askins-Fallin matchup in Oklahoma. Martinez campaigned to cut wasteful spending,

lower taxes to create more jobs, end government corruption and reform education. The Las Cruces prosecutor, who started the race with 3 percent name recognition, put 40,000 miles on her personal vehicle while meeting voters in every corner of the state and was rewarded with an opportunity to serve at a higher level.

Looking back on the campaign, Martinez said without hesitation, the most positive aspect was meeting the people of her state. And again, without hesitation, she named raising money as the least positive part of the process. "It was very challenging," she commented. "Being in law enforcement, it just didn't seem right." However, she admitted, asking got easier as time went on.

As governor, Martinez has found the most challenging portion of the job to be communicating to the Democratic-controlled Legislature her administration's plan. She knows bringing about change must be a bipartisan effort. Of making changes and implementing reforms, Martinez stated, "If we do it right and it proves itself, it will outlast all the elected officials."



When Martinez took office, the biggest challenge facing the state was a \$450 million deficit. She is proud of the fact that the state budget was balanced by “cutting fat” while protecting classroom spending and Medicaid. She is also proud of an enacted educational reform – the A to F Schools Ratings Act. This legislation will allow schools to be judged and graded on progress and growth, potential room for improvement and development of students.

“Public service is never about the individual. It has to be about those you serve.”

The governor has first-hand knowledge of New Mexico schools. Her favorite gubernatorial activity is visiting schools, meeting the students and participating in their reading programs. “Kids will say the darndest things,” she said with a laugh. She enjoys her interaction with the students and believes these visits can “make them think about life.” And perhaps these visits will inspire some of those students to pursue careers in public service. “Public service is never about the individual,” explained Martinez. “It has to be about those you serve.”

For now, Martinez is focused on serving the people of New Mexico. Being identified as the first Latina U.S. governor, the first female New Mexico governor or a political rising star is gratifying; however, for her, with the accolades come responsibility. “I must do it right,” she said. “All those little girls are watching.”

When asked about the future and the likelihood that she will want to move to a higher level of public service, Martinez responded “nothing is impossible.” That’s the same sentiment she expressed on election night when she told supporters, “This victory tonight says something ... that someone who grew up in a working family just a few miles from the border can achieve anything. I hope that the message it sends to all those children watching tonight is ‘The American dream is alive and well.’” | **SL** |



The governor enjoys her time visiting schools. Here, she reads to pre-K students on Halloween.